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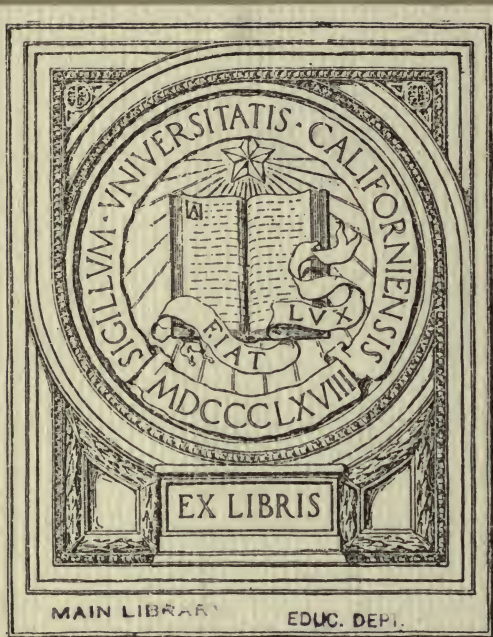
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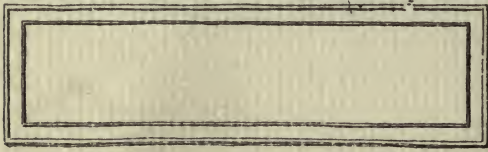
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ESSAYS ON VOCATION

EDITED BY BASIL MATHEWS

THE CAREER
OF AN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL TEACHER

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THE CAREER OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

BY FANNY STREET

(Secretary of the Teachers' Christian Union)

OF all the forms of service for the Kingdom of God for which to-day recruits are sought, the work of elementary teaching calls with special urgency for men and women of single-minded devotion. Few, perhaps, feel within themselves at the outset a conscious fitness or clear vocation for this high task. There are not many men and women now clearly convinced that they were called by God to this service, who were perfectly sure, when first they attempted to teach, that they had a special vocation. Such a conviction often develops by slow degrees in the course of training and experience. But all those who feel strongly the love of learning and the joy of sharing it, or the love of little children and the sacredness of their growth and development, should consider carefully whether this may not be the life-work towards which their own natural inclinations are rightly guiding them. Those, too, who are concerned for the needs of the world at large, who recognize the urgent necessity for a new attitude of mind towards the social, international, and inter-racial problems that beset us, may well consider whether the true education of the mass of the people is not the surest way to build up the new world for which we long.

Each of these three different aspects of the work may be interpreted as a call to those who have the power to meet some of its manifold demands. The lover of learning

may feel attracted to teaching but doubtful whether the elementary stages of education afford scope for the true scholar, whether he would not do well to train himself for more advanced work in which research and specialization might be his lot, rather than versatility with its danger of shallowness, and simplification with its danger to truth. It is true that the candidate who is a scholar first and a teacher a long way afterwards had better not aspire to elementary work, the most difficult and exacting form of teaching, which needs the finest exponents of the teacher's art for its true accomplishment. But those whose joy in learning is mainly in the sharing of it, who have a passion first for spreading truth and consequently for seeking it, may be encouraged to attempt to find their life-work in this sphere by remembering that a grasp of the range and profundity of any subject is a necessary equipment, with teaching power, for laying the true foundation for its study. The resources of a profound philosopher or deep theologian would be taxed to answer truly the searching questions propounded by children in the infant school, yet it is more important to meet these rightly than to preach or lecture to less impressionable and more sophisticated adults. Again, a wide and deep knowledge of history or of mathematics is needed rightly to use the material of these sciences as food for the growing child-mind. One of the many profound misconceptions which permeate our whole educational system is the notion expressed by its organization that elementary teaching is the least important branch of it, for which the slenderest equipment and the most hasty preparation will suffice. One of the best ways in which this pernicious notion can be countered is by the entry into that branch of the profession of men and women with a more exacting standard of its requirements in the matter of mental equipment and continuous intellectual renewal.

To the lover of children the call of the elementary schools is clearer and more insistent, for here certainly is the greatest need. Modern society is only just beginning to awake to the claims of children. A few, the children of well-to-do parents, are secure in the provision of healthy surroundings, adequate food and clothing, skilled guardianship of health and safety, and early training in right physical habits, manners, and speech. Fewer still, not all of these, are sure of a good moral and intellectual environment, of growing up in an atmosphere of art and culture, of taking for granted high principles or religious conviction. These last treasures are to be found in as many poor homes as rich, but the mass of the parents whose children attend elementary schools have little opportunity of providing for them at home the physical and social environment which society owes every child. Space and air, adequate food and chances of cleanliness, beauty and wisdom have in general to be provided for children away from their homes. It is a wrong system, and we should not accept it as permanent, but meanwhile the best way of altering it is to supply through the school an environment and training which will prevent the next generation from tolerating such a state of things. The nursery schools ought to make possible for all children the sheltered life during their early years which is now only possible for the few. For this to be done we need women with a passion for the service of childhood, prepared to face the fact, which every wealthy mother acts on unconsciously, that without an army of single women devoted to delegated motherhood, children will never in our existing society be properly brought up at all.

The elementary school is not, however, merely a national nursery. It is best for all children before they reach the years of adolescence to spend some part of their life in a juvenile community wider in its corporate nature

and more varied in its individual composition than even a large family. The school has a true part to play for all children in teaching them how to live in a larger company than the 'little platoon' in which they first begin to experience social life. Too often the school is thought of as a place where children are to be instructed, where they are to accumulate knowledge or practise skill ready for the business of life. This is another of our dangerous educational heresies. What has to be done in the years before adolescence is not so much to acquire learning as to secure the necessary tools for its later achievement. Children must learn at this stage how to find out facts from things and books and how to think clearly and independently about them, how to express their thoughts and imaginations in speech and writing, in argument or in verse, in music, form, and colour. The present curriculum of the elementary school can be made an admirable instrument for this purpose. It is not, in the early stages at any rate, so subject to the disastrous effects of examination requirements as the curriculum of most secondary schools, although the pernicious effect of the competition for scholarships is felt in the later stages. The opportunity of modifying it and of using it as a means rather than an end is in the hands of the teacher, and such an experiment as that described by Mr. Holmes in *What is and What Might be* shows how immeasurable is the scope before a village teacher of courage and vision. In the town school there is too often the immense practical hindrance of the huge and unwieldy class, but at present the shortage of teachers is such that reform seems indefinitely postponed.

With the adolescent stage—the last two or three years at the elementary school—we reach a period in the life of the child which is of incalculable importance for the future. This is the time when the powers of judgement

and discrimination begin to mature, when the special gifts and powers of the individual become discernible. It is the time when ideals and admirations are potent forces, when the herd instinct is strong and the community spirit developing. It is, therefore, the time when the child begins consciously to co-operate with the school and to assume responsibility for it, the time of all others when the teacher's individual personality and powers of inspiration and leadership are most effective. Children begin to perceive that their school atmosphere is not merely something given, existing by its own inherent power, but something spiritually created, not only by the individuals at the moment within it but by the tradition of the past and the responsibility for the future. The level of the plane upon which this corporate life is lived depends vitally upon the level upon which the teachers maintain their own spiritual life, and therefore one of the joys and terrors of teaching is that nothing whatever which the teacher does, says, or thinks can ever be regarded as outside the school. The personal religious life of the teacher and his contribution to the Church, his social and political activities as a citizen actively conscious of his obligation to the community, both react upon his personality and affect his influence in the school. So also will the standard of his own intellectual life apart from preparation for teaching, the literary value of the novels he reads, the aesthetic quality of the concerts and theatres he attends, the vigour and wholesomeness of the games he plays. Any attempt to live by a double standard, to teach upon one level and play upon another, is sure in the long run to weaken the teacher's power in school.

Here then is an opportunity for those who would serve. Here is a service which demands the whole man and the whole woman. Every power and faculty of the teacher must be developed to the utmost—athletic and artistic

gifts, intellectual vigour and depth of intuition, the art of expression in speech, action, and song. The teacher must lay every acquisition at the feet of children, bringing out of his treasure always things new and old for their use. He must live a full human life and be a balanced and cultivated human being in order that he may be able to serve every human need.

In so serving the children he will serve not only the present but all future generations, not only this nation but the world at large, and help to build up the Church which is yet to be. Whatever immediate reforms may be achieved towards the solution of the problems which press upon us, Christian education is the surest means of attacking them. At times despair seizes the student of political and social reforms ; so often a trusted remedy only serves to create a new disease or a carefully-thought-out system is distorted by the ill-will or self-interest of those who have to work it. Is there not more hope for the future in making better citizens, truer Christians, in training the minds and shaping the purposes of those who must choose the lawmakers and carry out the laws of the future ? The existing franchises for local and central government give the majority of ordinary men and women power to shape our social and national life and responsibility for the destiny of the Empire.

The part that England will play in working out the international government of the future and in guiding the destinies of backward peoples will be determined mainly by the teachers who undertake the education of the boys and girls now in our elementary schools. In the century to come, no doubt, politicians and statesmen, journalists and preachers, civil servants and administrators will guide policy and influence decision at critical moments. But it is the teachers in the next ten or twenty years who will determine whether our chosen leaders shall

be opportunist politicians or true statesmen, whether our press shall delude or illuminate us, whether our people will choose to have lying prophets or be able to discern the true word of God. It is the teacher who will organize school-work co-operatively rather than competitively, who will train men and women for service rather than for self-interest, who can alone make possible the transformation of our industrial and commercial life. It is the teacher who repudiates the false division between sacred and secular subjects and makes the whole curriculum a means of teaching the truth of God who will educate a generation clear-eyed as to moral and spiritual standards in political life, both national and international.

It is the teacher who has the world-vision and the sense of kinship with men and women of all nations and races who can make the school a place where boys and girls begin to feel themselves brothers and sisters of children in distant lands. This is not to be done by exhortation and argument, but by bringing the world-vision before them through the right selection of material and illustrations in history, geography, and literature. Stories and pictures of child-life in other lands, correspondence with foreign schools, learning the games, songs, and dances of the children of other nations and races are far more effective methods of cultivating the feeling of human kinship, which is so faint among adults to-day, and so necessary for the future of the world. (See Appendix, p. 14.)

These things are not impossible ideals and visionary hopes. Christian ideals of conduct between man and man and nation and nation are so much more natural and congenial to the uncorrupted child-mind than the society into which they are now expected to grow up, that most of the new experiments in education which are now proceeding are animated, though often unconsciously, by the Christian spirit.

It is true that the unchristian characteristics of our social order are too often reflected in the schools. Our materialistic standards of value are shown in our educational administration by our preference for expending money upon visible buildings and tangible apparatus rather than upon the teacher, the spiritual agent of education. Our selfish belief in inequality of opportunity is seen in the class-divisions between different types of schools and teachers, the false grading of salaries and standards of equipment, which are lowest for the most exacting and most important work of all. And the logical outcome of these false beliefs, namely, our dependence upon physical force, too often comes out also in the schools and their methods, in our substitution of compulsion for self-discipline, of regulation for liberty. Yet it is in the schools that the best opportunity lies of overthrowing these false gods.

Although it would seem that school and society are linked in a vicious circle, that is more apparent than real. The generations proceed spirally and continuously, and the upward thrust which prevents us from sinking to the hopelessness of a circular path must be given in the formative years of youth. Education is essentially a spiritual process, the action of one personality upon another, the transmission from the more mature to the younger spirit of a fuller life. The true teacher, therefore, can never be entirely defeated by even a materialized organization. He must work on the spiritual plane, though, as Germany has taught us, education may be so perverted by a wrong ideal as to misdirect the idealism of a whole nation. The true teacher, again, cannot distribute his efforts according to the false standards of class distinction; he naturally gives most to those who need most, and finds his highest distinction in the power to illuminate the duller mind. Nor can the true teacher

use force or material compulsion, corrupt or mechanical methods ; all these defeat his object and do not educate at all. However bad the material conditions of education then, all spiritual forces fight with the teacher. We have seen the downfall of a great system of education based upon untrue ideals and sedulously directed to the perversion of the mind of a great nation. What we might see in the future, if those who desire to serve the Kingdom of God would as Christian teachers fight with the stars and not against them, Mr. Kidd has set out in his book on *The Science of Power*.

Some dim realization of the incalculable importance of education seems at last to be dawning upon the minds of English people, though they have yet much to learn of its true nature and conditions before they can understand how to make effective arrangements for it. Lecky once argued that the provision of education was the one thing which could not be left to be regulated by the law of supply and demand because it was necessary to organize the supply first in order to create a demand at all. There are many signs that our rough-and-ready organization of a very imperfect and inadequate supply of education for the mass of the people during the past half-century has at any rate achieved a demand for more.

It is significant that education has been one of the most popular subjects of discussion among the men at the front, and that Mr. Fisher's Bill roused an interest in the country quite different in kind as well as greater in extent than that roused by any previous Education Act. Moreover, this Bill, although it marks a distinct advance in our national conception of the State's duty in respect of education, is far from satisfying the demands of the Labour Party, which displays a concern for the whole matter very different from the negligence or dislike which education usually meets with at the hands of

political parties. The teacher in an elementary school can, therefore, look forward with confidence to the co-operation and support of all democratic and progressive forces ; he can count on, though he may have to educate, the zeal of parents for their children's welfare. The school itself may be made the centre of the social activities of a neighbourhood, if the teacher will live with and for the children, as the Fern Street School Settlement in Bromley proves. Here, through the devoted labours of a teacher, the infant school has become the centre of the social life of a neighbourhood, and many voluntary clubs and co-operative undertakings have been organized in connexion with it.¹ Another example of pioneer work which is likely to have a powerful effect upon the development of nursery schools is the famous open-air Camp School at Deptford.

There will be for some time to come considerable hardship to face. Although salaries are rising, we are not yet within sight of the adoption of the logical principle of paying most highly for that form of teaching which is at once the most exacting and the most important. Although the social and administrative barriers between the various sections of the profession are steadily weakening, they will not disappear for some time to come. Those who undertake elementary teaching must therefore be prepared to face certain limitation of income and slender prospect of advancement, the chance of uncongenial colleagues or obstructive superiors, the possibility of administrative interference and the certainty of continual inspection. But it is just for these tasks that great mental and spiritual resources are needed ; it is a hard and heroic adventure that will attract the right kind of

¹ Visitors to the Fern Street School Settlement, Devons Road, Bromley by Bow, are welcomed by Miss Grant if a card is sent in time to allow of a reply.

recruit. Of all the careers now opening before those who desire to serve the Kingdom, elementary teaching yields to none in the reward set before the volunteer. There is no work so satisfying, none in which the personality tells more vitally, none which is more capable of absorbing all the powers and possibilities of the devotee. There is no career at once so influential and so obscure, so certain of giving scope for creating the future, while sheltered from the dangers and distractions of fame. It is open to any one of average natural intelligence and ordinary secondary school education who will undertake the necessary two years of inexpensive training and freely accept a strenuous, ill-paid, and obscure career, in order to share in laying unassailable foundations for the City of God.

APPENDIX

Some educational books and pictures suited either for the teacher or the child as contributing to the sense of kinship (see p. 9) are :

The Book of Other Babies. For reading to little children. By Mary Entwistle. (Illustrated.) United Council for Missionary Education, 8 Paternoster Row, E.C. 1s. net.

Talks on Races to be Won. By Deaville Walker. For teachers and leaders of juniors. U.C.M.E. 7d. net.

The Pathfinder Series. (Humphrey Milford.) Illustrated reading books for boys and girls.

Livingstone the Pathfinder. By Basil Mathews. 3s. 6d. net.

John Williams the Shipbuilder. By Basil Mathews. 3s. net.

Mackay of the Great Lake. By Constance Padwick. 3s. net.

Child Life in Many Lands. Wall pictures and postcards. Three sets of six each. 4s. 6d. the set. (Teaching material for these pictures from *The Book of Other Babies*, &c.) Any Missionary Society.

Missionary Playhours. By Vera Walker and Elsie Spriggs. L.M.S., 16 New Bridge St., E.C. 4. 4d. net.

Adventure for God. The Place of Missions in Christian Education. By Basil Mathews and Vera Walker. L.M.S., 16 New Bridge St., E.C. 4. 2d. net.

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